**Contrasting Modernities: the Rural and the Urban in Michael Chekhov’s Psychological Gesture and Meyerhold’s Biomechanical Études**

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If there were a robust sector of theatre history based on stories of what might have been, the thwarted collaborations of Michael Chekhov and Vsevolod Meyerhold would surely have figured strongly. Two of the most celebrated artists to emerge from the Stanislavsky tradition, their paths were forcibly diverted from one another by cultural and political developments in Moscow after the Russian revolution in 1917. Chekhov left Russia eleven years later; Meyerhold, as is well known, was never allowed to follow him, although he is reported to have rejected one opportunity to emigrate whilst on tour in Berlin in 1930, claiming his return was a “matter of honour” (Braun 1991: 261).

The most tantalizing of these might-have-been alliances is sketched by Chekhov himself in his autobiography, *Life and Encounters*:

Meyerhold had often invited me to act in his theatre during my time in Moscow. I had always wanted to work on a role under his direction. This time he made a new proposal. Knowing my love of *Hamlet*, he told me that he intended to stage the tragedy on his return to Moscow. He started to tell me his plan for staging it, and seeing that I was listening so intensely, he stopped, and looking askance at me slyly over his large nose, he said: “I won’t tell you, though. You’ll steal it. Come to Moscow and we will work together.”

(Chekhov 2005: 153-4)

Meyerhold obviously knew that Chekhov had already appeared as Hamlet in Moscow in the production of 1924 at MAT 2.[[1]](#endnote-1) He would have known, too, that such a prospect would have been tempting, to say the least, and particularly so for the self-confessed lover of Shakespeare just two years into a life-long period of exile.[[2]](#endnote-2) Yet despite this invitation from Meyerhold (and later plans too[[3]](#endnote-3)), and notwithstanding Chekhov’s undoubted desire to work with what he later called Meyerhold’s “tremendous” and “despotic imagination” (Leonard 1984: 39), there was in fact no practical collaboration between the two.

In truth, the creative pairing Meyerhold proposed would have papered over significant ideological and philosophical cracks between the two men. It would also have arrested the development of Chekhov’s specific contribution to actor training made during his time in exile in Europe and the US. Where Meyerhold’s work continued to develop in the equally vibrant and treacherous atmosphere of urban Moscow, Chekhov ultimately retreated to the calm isolation of an estate in Devon, funded by philanthropic millionaires to develop the theatre strand of a Utopian arts project. It is the contention of this chapter that these polarized contexts are not just part of the contrasting biographies of the two artists, but are evident in the very material of their archetypal acting exercises. Drawing on ideas of material culture, as well as on a close analysis of two of their defining practices -- Chekhov’s Psychological Gesture (PG) and Meyerhold’s biomechanical études -- I would like to argue that their most important meeting point is not at the local level of a shared creative lineage, nor at the political level evidenced by their experience of accusations of formalism.[[4]](#endnote-4) Instead, it may be best understood as two related but oppositional responses to twentieth-century European Modernism, as two sides of the same Modernist coin: that is, the running to, and retreat from, *the city*.

In constructing such an argument I hope to be adding to a growing body of research in performer training which evidences a historiographical and critical turn – a turn away from utilitarian analyses of acting ideas and methods towards a far more self-aware practice of cultural critique, which recognizes what Mark Evans identifies as the extent to which sets of training practices: “serve specific cultural, aesthetic, and socio-economic agendas” and are themselves shaped by these forces (2009: 6). A helpful tool to achieve such a focus in a short space of time may be drawn from material culture.

***Material Culture and Russian actor training***

Jules David Prown’s defining statement in the “Truth of Material Culture” (1995)[[5]](#endnote-5) is as good a place as any to start to evaluate its efficacy:

 Material culture is the study of material to understand culture, to discover the beliefs -- the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions -- of a particular community or society at a given time. The underlying premise is that human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individual who commissioned, fabricated purchased or used them, and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged.

(qtd in Harvey 2009: 6)

Already there are a few issues to tackle in relation to this definition. The first and perhaps least contentious aspect here is Prown’s suggested move from the local to the general -- from the “fabricated” object to the larger society. I am suggesting something similar in my indication above that a scrutiny of the PG and the études, may yield some important insight into Modernism’s complexities. But some caution must also be necessary here, given that such scalability from microcosm to macrocosm is always in danger of being artificially constructed rather than evidenced and may lead to tendentious rather than illuminating connections across these scales of operation. The second and related point is the slippage I am proposing here from Prown’s cultural reading of a *tangible object* to my analogous reading of an acting exercise *as if it were* an object. This is of course far more perilous territory and needs to be argued carefully. My defense in making this leap of logic at this stage is that the process of developing a training exercise -- or of “fabricating” it in Prown’s terms – simply moves the material under scrutiny from the leather and stone of the museum object to the flesh and bone of the actor.[[6]](#endnote-6) What’s more, given the focus on “use” in material cultural analysis, training exercises perhaps have an advantage over more conventional objects in that their materiality is intrinsically linked to their utility.

Karen Harvey proposes the following methodology of cultural material analysis:

1. We should attempt a description of the object itself, its physical attributes. Assess what the object is made of, how it was made and (of course) when […].
2. We can place the object in a historical context, primarily by referring to other evidence […].
3. Finally, we can explore more fully the place of the object (or its type) in the socio-cultural context […]. At this stage […] the researcher will continue to engage with and reflect on the material nature of the object.

(Harvey 2009: 15)

Viewed diagrammatically, Harvey’s simple methodology looks like this:

**[[7]](#endnote-7)**

With the areas of caution noted, above, I would like now to turn to a direct application of this approach to the embodied objects of Chekhov’s and Meyerhold’s practice.

***Description of the “object” – Chekhov’s Psychological Gesture***

The first object under scrutiny is the PG of an American actor-student (Bethany Caputo), “made” in December 2004 at the Spencertown Academy of the Arts in upstate New York. The actor is in her twenties and dressed in personal, loose, working clothes. Her brown hair is tied up behind, revealing a smooth face and an expression of focused attention. She is standing next to a teacher, who may be fifty years older than her and who is guiding her to simplify the gesture she is working on still further. They are working in an open studio theatre space, on a sprung wooden floor, naturally lit, with four or five other performers working on the same exercise in the background. She declares to her teacher that she is working with the “archetype of the addict.” She plays physically with this concept by exploring a whole-body gesture of “sucking,” working in several iterations, the last of which I will attempt to describe below, hoping to tie down a singular “object” for material analysis:

*The actor* *crouches on the floor, her right arm slightly ahead of her and her left behind. As she breathes in, she slowly stands, staring intently ahead and away from the teacher. Her right arm continues the movement upwards, in front of her groin and up to the waistband of her tracksuit bottoms; at first her right hand is clenched into a fist but as it reaches her waist it opens up and rests lightly on her stomach, like a ball room dancer eyeing up her partner. Towards the end of the gesture she vocalizes a sucking sound drawing air between her tongue and the roof of her mouth – She then breathes out a long, aspirated “aahh!”[[8]](#endnote-8)*



Fig 1a. Bethany Caputo’s PG exercise – start of the gesture



Fig 1b. Bethany Caputo’s PG exercise – end of the gesture

From beginning to end this gesture lasts just nine seconds, taking the actor from a low crouch to an upright, vertically expansive stance of confidence. It is taken from a published lesson on the PG, led by Joanna Merlin, one of 12 sessions taught by Chekhov experts to “students” with considerable experience of Chekhov technique and produced as a master-class DVD (Micha 2007). Whilst I have my own embodied experiences of working on the PG, I have chosen this example of the psychological gesture because it is a formalized recording available for close review and scrutiny. Arguably, it is as close to a static object as may be possible when the focus is on fluid training.

However, my attempt to offer what Clifford Geertz might have called a “thin description” (1973: 7), shorn of cultural and historical context nevertheless raises difficult questions.[[9]](#endnote-9) What account should be taken of the process leading up to this gesture? As an iterative and fluid exercise, which version of the PG does one select for analysis? (This is one of three short attempts at finding the gesture with which the actor was most viscerally connected). And how does one include any application of this gestural improvisation to later developmental work – on voice and text for instance? Such questions make clear how fraught the objectifying of a dynamic embodied process can be. But they also relate directly to one of the defining characteristics of Chekhov’s work – the interrelated nature of the exercises. Merlin’s class begins with preparatory work on Contraction and Expansion, leading into exploration of other archetypal gestures: Push, Pull, Lift, Embrace, Penetrate, Smash, Tear, and Wring (Micha 2007: 14-15). She then concentrates on *character* archetypes, such as the Politician, before applying this layering of preparatory work directly to the text (Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*), inviting the students to consider which archetype might best be explored for their character.[[10]](#endnote-10) So, the nine-second PG described above is really part of a nexus of other stimuli, already at work in the body of the actor and subtly influencing the form of the object. This is of course before any attempt is made to consider the impact of previous training, both within and beyond the Chekhov tradition. Such layering suggests that whilst cultural material analysis is not impossible, it must be sensitive to the peculiarities of a dynamic form.

***Historical Context***

Following Harvey’s method, the next layer of material scrutiny draws on other documents to clarify the historical context of the object, again a particularly complex problem for an embodied object such as the PG. The object clearly resides in the body of the actor but perhaps not solely, for it has been transmitted to that body from a range of historical sources, some of them written, some pictorial and some directly from a teacher. At the same time, though, in strictly formal terms the PG outlined above is uniquely Caputo’s – emerging as all PGs do from an intuitive balance of embodied thinking and improvisation. Any historical context must then try to capture both spheres of influence. One connecting point in this instance -- between the past and the present -- is Joanna Merlin, the last practicing teacher to have worked directly with Chekhov (from 1949 to 1955). But whilst Merlin represents a living connection to the tradition, it is not of course *her* PG, but one derived from her teaching and gentle prompting in the session. This tension is a particular function of the focus Chekhov placed on the individualactor, as Deirdre Hurst du Prey, his co-teacher and life-long documenter, suggests in her description of working on the PG with Chekhov:

You experienced the psychological gesture, which you had found, as a means to enliven you […] Very often you were left to work on your own -- you had to discover the psychological gesture for yourself.

(Chekhov 2004: 9)

By definition, then, the PG is individualized and has no common set of repeatable contours, unlike Meyerhold’s études, or for that matter any training regime that relies on the re-embodiment of physical models passed down the generations – Tai Chi, or Yoga for instance. That said, the principles by which the PG should be generated *are* inscribed in historical documents, and whilst there is neither need nor scope here to outline all of them, a focus on its genesis as a term and its early definition is helpful, before moving to the socio-cultural layer of analysis.

Thanks to Deirdre Hurst du Prey’s precision as a custodian of Chekhov’s ideas, it is possible to narrow down the first use of the term to an exact date in the first term of teaching in the rural retreat of Dartington, Devon: “Much use was made of the psychological gesture” she stated in a lecture in 1991, “the 1st reference to which was on November 23, 1936.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Although there were earlier precedents to the exercise, going as far back as Chekhov’s time working with Vakhtangov in Moscow, there is no formal record of the term being used before this date. Confidence in this claim is strengthened by the fact that Chekhov’s *Lessons for Teachers of his Acting Technique* (2000), constructed from the shorthand records of du Prey between April and June 1936, just five months before her definitive dating, has no reference to the PG, whilst the ideas of Radiation, the feeling of Form and of the Whole, of Concentration and of Atmosphere all feature prominently. The seeds of thinking which were to crystallize into the chapter on the PG in *To the Actor*, were, however, already evident in the classes Chekhov taught to du Prey and to Beatrice Straight in that spring preparation session in 1936.

***Gesture and Speech***

Try to speak with the hands and body. The gestures you do transform themselves into your speech. You must find very simple gestures, which must afterwards find their way into your speech. English people are so rigid that their speech is absolutely without gesture. They speak only with their brains. That is why actors on the English stage just speak and move as in everyday life, but that is not acting and it is not art […].

Now, in broad, defined gestures, try to form the whole thought. Then try giving every word a gesture. Don't try to illustrate. Only will. It is absolutely opposite to illustration – that is not good.

(Chekhov 2000: 27)

Whilst the term “Psychological Gesture” had not yet been arrived at, there is much here which is redolent of Chekhov’s later approach and which ultimately is evident in Caputo’s work nearly seventy years later: the bringing of a gestural movement *into* speech; the attempt to find a gesture at the macro level (the whole thought) and the micro-level (word by word); the pursuit of broad simplicity in the gesture, connection to the will (i.e. the addict wants to suck) and the avoidance of a dead intellectualism, which Chekhov clearly considered to be part of the English theatre tradition at the time.[[12]](#endnote-12)

***Socio-cultural context***

Material cultural analysis would suggest that this example of the PG carries with it evidence of the social context within which the artwork was produced. Once more, this might be thought of on two planes – the context of Caputo as actor and the context of Chekhov as creator of the PG. I will concentrate my commentary on the latter and focus the discussion on the socio-cultural “clues” in the description of the object. These can be summarized as follows:

* The emphasis on play and discovery;
* The pursuit of a redefined version of an original archetype (in this case the addict);
* The *concealed* translation of a felt gestural experience into character work on text (in this case *The Three Sisters*).

Caputo’s PG was arrived at after several improvisations using various qualities and rhythms, a process of discovery which, according to Chekhov, is an essential aspect of character development, as he states in *To the Actor*:“by collaborating, improving, perfecting and exercising the PG you are, more and more, becoming the very character yourself at the same time” (2002: 68). This reliance on an intuitive character development, stimulated by improvisation, is a well-known hallmark of Chekhov’s practice, and is often attributed to his training with Stanislavsky and then at the First Studio under Sulerzhitsky. Chekhov’s own improvisatory credentials are equally well known and symbolized in his belief that “the actor must hear the word that sounds out of the present time [...] from the living spectator in the evening, during the performance” (2005: 127). But this development of an improvisatory approach to the PG also tells us something important about the rural context in which it was first coined – the Dartington estate in Devon, England. For here, Chekhov was pursuing, systematically, the means by which he could empower actors to embrace improvisation. His use of extended études, such as those relating to the work on the *Fishing Scene* in 1937, is one example. The *Fishers* scene study was designed by Chekhov to enlist the whole ensemble of students in collective improvisation, or in what would now be called *devising*. These improvised studies, used as an integrating tool, formed a central part of the curriculum at Dartington and indicate the extent to which Chekhov was eschewing fixed models of training in favor of the fluidity and creative challenge of improvisation.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Chekhov’s attitude to the archetype is also caught up in a specific, if admittedly more opaque, context. His insistence that the PG is *built from* an archetypal base is revealing when placed in the context of his fascination for Steiner and Goethe, both of whom argued that archetypes were the root of an organic understanding of the world and of science. I have identified elsewhere the details of this archetypal thinking and its relationship to Romanticism (Pitches 2006), but here it is worthwhile linking this idea to the last signifier of cultural context – the concealing of a gestural experience -- for both carry the residue of the Dartington influence which was so strong at the time of the PG’s invention as well as the stamp of earlier cultural influences. The PG in fact is an archetype itself – an archetype of the character in preparation, one which must be *simple*, *strong* and *well formed* (Chekhov 2002: 76) and never seen on stage. It acts like a hidden core, retrievable through the actor’s memory of the training but only evident in her particularized gestures seen on stage. Chekhov’s reference points when describing the PG are consistently drawn from nature, and, following in the footsteps of Goethe, he considered the forms of the natural world to be individualized manifestations of an unseen biological archetype. In *Lessons for Teachers* for instance he offers an exercise for developing concentration:

There is an exercise that Goethe always used; the image of a plant growing. For instance, a tree must grow and you start with a very little thing which appears from the earth […] ask the pupils to imagine a tree and a house and try to recreate the tree into the house without breaking it or bringing new elements into it.

(Chekhov 2000: 37)

Indeed much of the language used to describe the PG during the classes he was leading in the second year of Dartington was as far removed from the city as he himself was in the Chekhov Studio on the Elmhirst’s estate: “Repeat the scene, looking into the archetype and finding the image of Alina […] she speaks with the flowers and the raspberries around her.”

And

To develop the ability to plunge into the archetype it is necessary to do some mental exercises […]. You must imagine the spring, the first shoots, the water -- little streams of water in the spring […]. All of these things are the way to the archetype.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Importantly, these nature-inspired archetypes are progressively absorbed through rehearsal and naturalized into the context of the play. They do not, in Chekhov’s practice, particularly lead to stylization or abstraction, even if their root is in such strong imagery. In one sense at least Chekhov’s reliance on the romantic imagery and ideas of Goethe offers an alternative model of naturalism to the Zolaesque Darwinian laboratory.[[15]](#endnote-15)

***Description of the “object” – Meyerhold’s Horses étude***

To develop this approach further, let us now shift focus to an object of training created by Vsevolod Meyerhold, following Harvey’s model again. Here I am taking my description of the object from an eye-witness account first set down to provide a record of the movements involved for biomechanics trainees. It is of a lesser known étude or physical study called *Horses*:

Horses [for 3]…

1. Arms on the shoulders. [To form the Horse, the First Figure (rear of Horse) leans forward and places his hands on the shoulders of Second Figure (head of Horse) to form a saddle for the Rider.]
2. Rider moves backward.
3. Horse (two Figures) and Rider run.
4. Rider runs up to the Horse.
5. Placement of the hands.
6. Stopping.
7. Positioning of the Horse.
8. Leap onto the Horse.
9. Rider takes a sitting position.
10. Running.
11. Recoil by rider for leap from the Horse.
12. Leap by Rider from the Horse.

(Law and Gordon 1996: 123)

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Fig2. The biomechanical étude *Horses* (Law and Gordon 1996: 230)

The actors are divided into carriers and riders, according to weight. They wear the distinctive utilitarian “uniform” of Meyerhold’s actors – known as *prozodezhda* – and are pictured against a neutral backdrop, maximizing the sense of laboratory work and detachment from the illusory world of the stage. In the illustration above there are three subgroups performing the exercise, as it is described by the eye-witness; this suggests that there is a further group dimension or elaboration on the exercise for trio. The étude itself would have taken no more than 90 seconds to perform in its entirety and the action pictured is either from point 8 or point 12 of the étude – mounting or dismounting the Horse.

***Historical context***

One cannot be quite as precise with the dating of this object of training as we can with the PG but the evidence of historical context is nonetheless very well defined. Meyerhold’s études were first devised in the Meyerhold Workshop, shortly after the Russian Revolution, with his collaborators Mikhail Korenev, Valery Inkizhinov, daughter Irina, and later Nikolay Kustov. A list of 22 études features in the 1922 Program of Biomechanics for this workshop, and the Horse étude is identified as No.14 (Hoover 1974: 314). After this specific moment in time – the “intense, cold winter of 1921-22” (Leach 1994: 110) and under Kustov’s leadership, the études were refined and reduced, first in the 1930s and second in the early 1970s, when Kustov taught a small cohort of students from the Theatre of Satire in the evenings. By then, the repertoire had been reduced from twenty-two études to just five – Shooting the Bow (No.1 in the original list), The Slap (No. 5), Throwing the Stone (No.9), Leap on the Chest (No. 10) and its variant, Stab with the Dagger (No. 11).

The Horse étude, then, is from a less prescriptive period of development in theatrical biomechanics than today, where Kustov’s two remaining students center their training on this “canon” of five solo and pair etudes.[[16]](#endnote-16) As the collective version of *Horses* implies, the original list from 1922 incorporates larger groups of students (études for three, four, and above) and a wider range of subject matter. One of the important historical roots of the études, the *commedia dell’arte*, is arguably more evident in this period too, as in addition to the lazzi-inspired Slap on the Face, there are études, such as the Fool, Stumbling, Leapfrog, and Blow on the Nose (Law and Gordon 1996: 105), important generic counterpoints to the high tragedy of The Stab with the Dagger, for instance.

1922 is also notable as the period when the relationship between training (biomechanics) and production was at its closest. Whilst the documentation *style* resembles a rather hermetically sealed laboratory, a point to which I will return in the following section, the reality was that there was an unprecedented porosity between Meyerhold’s approach to staging new work and the études in development at this time. The direct citation of the Leap on the Chest étude in Meyerhold’s production of *Magnanimous Cuckold* (25 April 1922) is a very well known exception to the rule that études were not to feature in production work, but it is worthwhile noting it again in this context, for it is indicative of a time in the development of Meyerhold’s training when the utility of the exercises needed almost immediate road testing on the Zon stage.[[17]](#endnote-17) In *Revolutionary Theatre,* Robert Leach identifies the key players in this particularly intense period of training and production, pre-empting in his own analysis the next section on socio-cultural context:

An acting style was established through the triumphant playing of Meyerhold’s ensemble which may be regarded *as almost definitive for revolutionary theatre*. It was rooted in biomechanics, of course, and the three leading players, Igor Ilinsky, Maria Babanov and Vasily Zaichikov were so in harmony they became known collectively as “Il-Ba-Zai.”

(1994: 111, my emphasis)

***Socio-cultural context***

Leach’s description of Meyerhold’s trio of star actors helps date the period of experimentation with the études almost with the same accuracy as with the PG above, but it also makes a larger claim: that the work in Meyerhold’s theatre was somehow emblematic of a wider set of ideals intrinsically connected to the Revolution. This is perhaps unsurprising as this period (1920-24) in Soviet theatre is not short of examples of productions that responded to the emergent Bolshevik regime with enthusiasm and directness.[[18]](#endnote-18) But the purpose of this essay is to try to root these revolutionary ideals in the object of biomechanical training itself – the *Horses* étude – not in the production record. Whilst this may be a more complex task, closer examination of the details of this étude does yield some fascinating connections to the wider socio-cultural context within which Meyerhold was operating in 1922. Again, I will restrict my analysis to just three key points embedded in the object *Horses*:

* The “scientific” approach to the documentation of the étude;
* The careful separation of the étude into separate, titled parts or actions;
* The implied focus on efficiency, collectivity, and ensemble.

The desire to capture, record, and archive the work at Meyerhold’s Theatre Workshop is notable, and it is largely due to this documentary imperative that analyses such as this one are possible at all. Alexei Temerin, an actor in Meyerhold’s studio, was tasked with recording the work for posterity and several of his visual records (and some film footage) have survived. Many études were recorded against the same backdrop pictured here, and they are often staged so as to emphasize certain elements of the étude. Here, it is the staging of the étude in three synchronized groups, stressing its acrobatic challenge; elsewhere Temerin recorded actors performing separate actions of the same étude simultaneously, so that the progression of the actions could be appreciated and understood.[[19]](#endnote-19) Of course, not all of the documentation of biomechanics was done in the studio – Kustov’s famous pictures of the Shooting the Bow étude, transported to the US by Lee Strasberg – are taken on the beach, and other performers were pictured on the roofs of buildings in Moscow. But the conscious staging of the études in photographic terms speaks to a wider attempt by Meyerhold and his students to establish a certain scientific credibility around the practice. The photographic record needs, then, to be seen alongside a range of publications, productions and workshop demonstrations, which allied the practice of biomechanics with the larger ideological narrative of efficiency and industrialization. Mikhail Korenev’s short essay *The Biomechanical Laboratory*, is a good source from the period to illustrate this connection:

The purpose of the biomechanical laboratory is the working out by experimental means of the biomechanical system of acting and of actor training… In the area of the practical is the construction of a series of exercises from the simplest task of individual movements to the most complex, co-ordinated group movements. The training of a “new accelerated man” (A Gastev’s formula) with his quick reactions, with his facility for always being on the watch for the idea of socialist construction, with his ability to spare himself, expending a minimum of nervous energy.

(Law and Gordon 1996: 134).

There is not space here to debate the various tensions inherent in this statement beyond noting that there is a clear positioning being performed here by Korenev: biomechanics aligned with Gastev’s efficiency drive in industry. In some ways this claim ran counter to the principles of *theatrical* biomechanics – the value of efficiency in the theatre is a moot point, after all. But for the purpose of this discussion, Korenev’s summary helpfully connects the object of enquiry with the bigger socio-political picture, making clear that the exercises are “constructions,” designed to deliver a series of benefits for actor and director: stamina, responsiveness, and scalability.

But what is the construction at work in the étude, *Horses*? In common with the other études devised in the early 1920s, *Horses* is a simple action (mounting and dismounting) broken down into component parts, each with a separate title. There are twelve units of action to this étude, which would have been further broken down using the biomechanical rhythm or “acting cycle” – intention, realization, reaction.[[20]](#endnote-20) This acting cycle was based on the premise that each forward action needs a preparatory movement in the opposite direction (albeit a small action in some instances) and that a period of rest or pause punctuates the transitions between actions. As is well documented, Meyerhold was fusing his own passion for the popular theatre tradition (which clearly formed part of his pre-revolutionary training in St Petersburg) with elements of the new Soviet push for efficiency and industrialization – specifically the Taylorization of work rhythms. The payoff from a theatrical point of view was a set of exercises which had clarity of form and rhythmic decisiveness, one which developed a strong facility for stylized acting; but, from a cultural material perspective, this object of training has embedded in it a set of identifiable ideological and social conditions.

***The Rural and the Urban: Contrasting Modernities***

One area of discussion remains to be examined in this final concluding section which may be expressed in a question: to what extent are there grounds to extrapolate further *still --* from the socio-cultural context of the training “objects” to the artistic macro-movement of Modernism itself? To approach this question, it may be worth recalling one of the tensions in Modernism itself. On the one hand we have the broad association of Modernism with urban capitals, so eloquently captured in Malcolm Bradbury’s essay, “The Cities of Modernism”: “In many respects,” he argues, “the literature of experimental modernism which emerged in the last years of the 19th century and developed into the present one [i.e., the 20th century] was an art of cities” (Bradbury and McFarlane 1991: 96). It was the heady environment of the European metropolises, replete with cafés, galleries, publishers and artists, which underpinned the necessary cultural exchange that spawned the complexity of the movement; as Bradbury writes: “When we think of Modernism, we cannot avoid thinking of these urban climates” (ibid.). Meyerhold’s work is emphatically part of such a sensibility – and although he moved between two capitals – St Petersburg/Petrograd and Moscow – the influence of the city was consistently expressed in his approach to biomechanics, as I have illustrated above.

But in productive tension with this trope of the urban there is another characteristic of Modernism that offered a counterpoint to the future-focused city dweller, expressing itself in a resistance to technology and embracing instead a conscious primitivism (of form and content). This urge does not map seamlessly on to the rural -- I am not arguing here for a sub-genre of rural Modernism *per se*, although others have[[21]](#endnote-21) -- but it does draw in other key reference points -- Symbolism and Expressionism for instance -- which play a part in the practices under scrutiny here.

Both Meyerhold and Chekhov are implicated in a symbolist history of theatre – with Meyerhold developing his first innovations as a director working with Valery Bryusov on Maeterlinck’s *Death of Tintagiles* as early as 1905*.* But Chekhov remained fascinated by elements of theatrical symbolism for the larger part of his career. As Daniel Gerould clarifies, “symbolist performance was drawn to folklore, Church ritual, pagan rites, fairytales, popular superstitions, and communal practices,” alongside an aspiration to integrate -- not isolate -- the arts of music, poetry and painting with the theatre (1985: 9). The main research undertaken by Chekhov’s students at Dartington was on folk tales, and from an analysis of the symbolist scene studies he used there (such as the Yeats-like *Fishers* scene, cited above) his interdisciplinary approach was unquestionable. He may not have been identifiable as a symbolist by his directorial output but his time at Dartington points to a symbolist sensibility that pervades his pedagogy. From such a point of view, it is illuminating that the major influence on Chekhov’s patron, Leonard Elmhirst, as he established the principles of the Dartington project, was “the living embodiment of all the major symbolist aspirations in the arts” -- Rabindranath Tagore (Gerould 1985: 17).

Chekhov and Meyerhold’s training exercises, treated as objects of material culture, do, then, illustrate certain (modernist) tensions related to the contrasting contexts of their development. But these are not sufficient wholly to distinguish their practices as urban and rural poles of Modernism. Despite their divergent teaching practices and the philosophies that underpinned them, the meeting points between the two men are as notable as their differences. Chekhov developed his acting technique in special isolation from the city on the Elmhirsts’ estate – but he had laid the foundations for its development and cut his own teeth as an actor and teacher in post-revolutionary Moscow. Meyerhold, conversely, first practiced his art as a director in the provinces of pre-revolutionary Russia, thousands of kilometers from the busy urban centers of Moscow and St Petersburg. Both men were motivated by the same urge to train actors capable of delivering a utopian “Theatre for the Future,” even if they differed in their approach to realizing such a goal. And perhaps it is this collective urge that is ultimately the most important shared ground in terms of their contributions to Modernism. Olga Taxidou writes:

Modernist performance also takes part in the Platonic tradition in its sheer Utopian aspirations. Eliot’s quest for Christian Tragedy, Yeats's attempts at creating a national Irish drama, the world building (and destroying) fervour of the historical avant-garde, Brecht’s search of [sic] “models” for the future, all re-establish the link between theatre and philosophy while, importantly, proposing new ways of living, utopian worlds.

(2007: 6)

Whether the starting point for such a utopian vision was the machine or the mountain is ultimately perhaps less important than the pursuit itself, one which Chekhov and Meyerhold pursued with equal imagination and vigor.[[22]](#endnote-22)

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1. ***Notes***

#  For a new translation of the rehearsal notes (or protocols) to this production see Chekhov 2013.

 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The closest the two ever got to working together was fictionally – in Meyerhold’s production of Yuri Olesha’s *A List of Benefits* (1931). From behind the thinly veiled figure of Elena Goncharova “the image of Chekhov…peered through” as Konstantin Rudnitsky put it (1981: 491). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Another plan to snatch Chekhov from Lithuania before he moved to Devon was also hatched by Meyerhold, in pursuit of his own Theatre of the Future (Rudnitsky 1981: 500). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Accusations that ultimately cost Meyerhold his life: “Making use of the age old method of guilt by association, the [RAPP]’s directive drew a parallel between Meyerhold’s use of ‘mechanical rhythm’ as part of his biomechanical system, and ‘the idealistic, anthroposophical devices of Mikhail Chekhov and Andrei Bely [rhythm as dialectics]. Technicism, fetishism, constructivism, the reinforcing of leftist rationalism and mechanicalism facilitate the development of the artistic methodology of Theosophy, and that in turn leads to a peculiar kind of formalism [Woe to Wit]’” (Law and Gordon 1996: 57-8). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This is a slightly revised version of an earlier definition made by Prown (1982: 1-2). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Further justification is provided by Prown’s own suggestion of the range of cultural “objects” which might be appropriate for material cultural analysis: Art, Diversions, Adornment, Modifications of the landscape, and Applied arts and Devices. Intriguingly “theatrical performances” are listed under Diversions. The focus of his ensuing analysis is however, entirely focused on art objects. Cf. Prown (1982: 3). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Prown’s tripartite analysis is subtly different: description, deduction, speculation (Prown 1982: 7). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For the video record of this gesture see Micha 2007: Disc 2, 36’48” -- 36’57”. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Geertz actually attributes the idea of thick and thin description (the former an attempt to provide a rounded context to the observed phenomenon) to Gilbert Ryle (1973: 6). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Caputo is working with the character of Natasha. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. From a speech made at Harvard by du Prey on the 100-year anniversary of Chekhov’s birth (1922-2002: MC/S9/2). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Chekhov’s fellow Russian, Theodore Komisarjevsky, practicing in London at the same time, held very similar views. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For a detailed analysis of this study using archival records of *Fishers*, see Pitches 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lesson entitled “Archetype” October 29th 1937: Dartington archive reference: MC/S1/7/B. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Of course one of the main contexts for late nineteenth-century naturalism was the Darwinian theory of inheritance and natural selection. Chekhov’s work perhaps suggests an alternative theoretical basis related to Goethean science. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. They are Aleksey Levinsky (1995) and Gennady Bogdanov (1997) [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Law and Gordon identify *The Death of Tarelkin* and *DE* as two other productions that included citations of études (1996: 45). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See, amongst others, Nick Worrall’s listing for the period in *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage* (1989: xii-xiii), including Meyerhold’s *The Dawns*, Evreinov’s *The Storming of the Winter Palace,* Mardzhanov’s *Towards the World Commune* and Okhlopkov’s *Struggle of Labor and Capital.* [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See for instance Temerin’s photograph of five actors performing Shooting the Bow (1927). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. There are numerous translations of this cycle; the Russian version is: *otkaz*, *posyl*, *tochka*. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Daniel Singal, for instance describes William Faulkner as a “stellar example of a rural modernist” (1997: 144). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Joanna Merlin’s observations on the rural influences of Dartington are of especial interest. I am indebted to her for looking over this essay and offering extremely helpful commentary. She observes: “After living and working in the urban cities MC worked in, in Russia and all over Europe, I think the atmosphere of Dartington, and perhaps Ridgefield, provided Chekhov with the peace of mind that confirmed his idea of the importance of the ‘feeling of ease.’ In Ridgefield, he was still under the shadow of WWII and the pain of leaving Dartington. But in Dartington, he had 2 ½ years of ease himself, which allowed him the freedom to evolve his approach. I am uncertain as to when he first mentioned ease, but I have found the term to be a basis for all the MC work. Having visited his home in Dartington with my husband (the current owner let us explore the house) where MC spent many months learning English before he started to teach, and experiencing the magnificent countryside, the grass, theatre, etc. it is no wonder that he was filled with beauty and ease and incorporated it into the work” (email communication 6/11/13). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)